

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom sent the following letter to Secretary of State Kerry on April 12, 2013.

The Honorable John F. Kerry

Secretary of State

U.S. Department of State

Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

I write today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to respectfully urge that the United States raise questions about violations of religious freedom and related human rights in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Bangladesh during the sixteenth session of the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) scheduled for April 2013. The United States also should ensure that these issues are included in the recommendations that result from the UPR. The UPR forum provides a unique opportunity to shine a light on the violations of religious freedom in these countries and

to encourage these nations' governments to comply with international norms.

The U.S. State Department has officially identified the government of Uzbekistan as one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom, since its 2006 designation as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for perpetrating or tolerating systematic, ongoing, egregious religious freedom violations. Similarly poor conditions exist in Turkmenistan, a country USCIRF repeatedly has recommended be designated a CPC. Regarding Russia, USCIRF has placed Russia on our Watch List since 2009 due to the nature and extent of the religious freedom violations perpetrated or tolerated by the government of that country. USCIRF also has monitored conditions in Azerbaijan and Bangladesh.

Specific concerns identified by USCIRF include:

Uzbekistan: The Uzbek government harshly penalizes individuals for independent religious activity regardless of their religious affiliation. A restrictive religion law facilitates state control over all religious communities, particularly the majority Muslim community, but also Christian and other non-Muslim religious groups. The government arrests Muslims and represses individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to officially-prescribed practices or that it claims are associated with extremist political programs. Thousands of individuals remain imprisoned as alleged extremists, including many who reportedly are denied due process and subjected to torture. While Uzbekistan does face security threats from groups that advocate or perpetrate violence in the name of religion, vague anti-extremism laws are applied against many Muslims and others who pose no credible threat to security.

Turkmenistan: Severe religious freedom violations have persisted in Turkmenistan for years, and USCIRF has recommended CPC designation since 2000. Despite a few limited reforms undertaken by President Berdimuhamedov after he took office in 2007, the country's laws, policies, and practices continue to violate international human rights norms, including those on freedom of religion or belief. Police raids and other harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue. The repressive 2003 religion law remains in force, causing major difficulties for religious groups to function legally. Turkmen law does not allow a civilian alternative to military service and nine Jehovah's Witnesses are currently imprisoned for conscientious objection.

Russia: Over the past year, religious freedom conditions in Russia deteriorated further, along with associated rights of freedom of speech and association. Concerns include the application of laws on religious and non-governmental organizations to violate the rights of allegedly "non-traditional" religious groups and Muslims; the use of the extremism law against religious groups and individuals not known to use or advocate violence, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses and readers of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi; intolerance of religious groups deemed "alien" to Russian culture; and the government's failure to adequately address xenophobia, including anti-Semitism, which results in sometimes lethal hate crimes. In addition, an arsenal of restrictive new laws against civil society was passed in 2012, and a draft blasphemy bill before the Duma, would, if passed, further curtail the freedoms of religion, belief and expression.

Azerbaijan: Despite the government's claims of official tolerance, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan have deteriorated over the past few years. During 2012, religious organizations were closed and non-violent religious activity was punished with detentions, fines and other penalties. The Azeri government applied the repressive religion law adopted in 2009 that curtails a range of religious activities. The religion law was amended in 2010 and 2011 to increase penalties for religion law violations. Unregistered religious activity is illegal and the activities of registered groups are tightly regulated.

Bangladesh: While over the past year Bangladesh continued to take positive steps in rectifying past religious freedom violations, non-state actors targeted religious minorities, such as Buddhists, Ahmadis, and Hindus, with impunity in 2012 and 2013. The government was slow to respond to violence targeting Hindus after the February 2013 conviction and death sentence by hanging by the country's International War Crimes Tribunal of a Jamaat-e-Islami leader, Delawar Hossain Sayedee. Over 80 individuals died, and dozens of temples, shrines, homes and businesses were burned down.

The UPR process offers a unique opportunity for U.S. representatives to ask hard questions of these nations, whose records on religious freedom and related human rights are profoundly troubling. We urge the United States to take the lead in raising these important issues at the UPR, as well as encouraging likeminded countries to do the same. Doing so would publicly reaffirm that the promotion of religious freedom remains a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy and a concern to the international community.

Sincerely,

Katrina Lantos Swett
Chair